

Textiles: Symbols and Meaning in the Embroidery of Epirus

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In the past all textiles produced were imbued with symbols and meanings easily identified by all members of the community. These same symbols and designs are often echoed in other arts and crafts such as architecture ceramics and jewellery making. The long and turbulent history of Greece has left a visible legacy in its embroidery designs which have been influenced by Ottoman, Venetian, Genoese and Frankish rule. This paper seeks to explore the influences on the textiles of the Epirus region. Textiles have historically played a significant role in the household and in the dress of Greek women and tell a story rich with heritage and meaning.

Introduction

The embroideries of Epirus from the eighteenth and nineteenth century are of particular interest because they are the only mainland embroidery generally included with the study of island embroideries. Furthermore there are a number of textiles from this period, which are held in museums, thus providing the opportunity to observe first hand the exquisite work executed by anonymous women from another time. To gain an understanding of the important role that textiles, and in particular embroidered textiles, have played in the Greek heritage of Epirus it is necessary to explain why it is that the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries produced the pinnacle of Greek embroidery in Ioannina,¹ the capital of the region. For fullness of discussion other examples of Greek embroidery will also be briefly touched upon by way of comparison with Epirus embroidery.

Greece with its complex history of changing borders and diversity of foreign rulers has left a rich legacy of history and heritage, which is ever present in its preservation of embroideries in both the public and private arena. Geographically it is positioned so close to Africa, Asia and Europe that it has, at various times, presented itself as predominantly either Eastern, or Western in outlook and influence. This too, has left

¹ Spelling is consistent throughout the paper except for direct quotes.

its impression in the art of embroidery and other textiles. Its geographic position also meant that it was well positioned for trade and the exchange of ideas, which naturally follows. Further more the difficult terrain of many parts of Greece which separated people by mountains and sea led to a *gemeinschaft* existence which ensured that tradition in folkways and craft remained strong from generation to generation despite the exposure to new designs and ideas in embroidery. The embroidery of Greece therefore displays much variation in style, design, colour and stitching depending on the region or village in which the work was produced.

As Clabburn has commented:

It is true that fine embroideries can be enjoyed just as fine embroideries; but it is also true that they are immeasurably more interesting when seen as being the products of a particular time and place. (Clabburn, 1981:7)

At a quick glance Greek embroidery tells a story of the region in which it was made and the purpose of the textile. Upon closer examination the embroidered motifs and design reveal much more, for they often carry symbols to be “read” by those who know their meaning. The rich legacy of Greek embroidery thus provides layers of meaning to be enjoyed not only for their beauty alone but also for their deeper symbolic meaning. The influence of foreign rule has also left its mark on the craft of embroidery. Different areas of what is now known as “modern Greece” fell under the conquest of different peoples at different times, thus the influence left by those conquerors of the past are many. The Genoese, Venetians and Franks all left their mark but the strongest influence was that of the Ottomans. On 29 May 1453 Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks and their long reign left a lasting influence, which was felt most of all in the region of Epirus, under the longest Ottoman rule of Greece. Epirus finally became a part of modern Greece after the Balkan wars in 1913.

Ottoman Turks and Epirus: the development of the Ioannina textile industry

During the long reign by the Ottoman Turks over Epirus one ruler stands out for both his tyrannical ways and his success in developing the lands under his control.

Ali Pasha ruled over all of Epirus and made the capital Ioannina the centre of business activity. Epirus as a whole was well positioned to deal with both Eastern and Western Europe. His success however would not have been possible without the knowledge of many of the Greeks under the control of the Ottoman Empire. Foss indicates the important role that Greeks played in Ali Pasha’s success:

Ioannina under Ali Pasha in spite of his treachery and extortions became the most prosperous centre in the Balkans. Ali quickly saw the advantages his exchequer would gain from the trade. For these benefits he depended upon the Greeks because of their great gifts for commerce, which Islam despised. (Foss, 1978:48)

Fleming provides a detailed account of the extent of the commercial textile industry at the time and comments that:

Textiles worked in Ioannina enjoyed particularly wide circulation. Silk braid (yaitan or hrysoyaitan) was exported to Italy and throughout the Balkans, as were scarves, blankets, gold and silver thread, and embroidered slippers and garments. Spun cotton from the plains of Trikkala, Thessaly and Macedonia was routed through Ioannina, and imported textiles such as velvet were embroidered for re-exportation. Finely worked silver was also a major export of the area and was in great demand for swords and rifle and gun stocks throughout the Balkans. (Fleming, 1999:46)

It is clear from the accounts of both writers that Ali Pasha was highly influential in creating a vibrant textile industry in Epirus. Under his rule many people were employed in workshops to produce the high quality goods for commerce. Taylor describes the three major crafts groups that formed the basis of the industry as being tailors, metal thread workers and silk embroiderers (Taylor, 1998:131). Travel accounts of the time reveal the very strong interest held for these embroidered textiles including fashionable Ioannina costume. Under the rule of Ali Pasha from 1787–1820, Epirus and in particular the capital Ioannina saw the arrival of western travellers many who were philhellenes in search of ancient Greece. Well-known English figures such as Lord Byron came to Epirus and were welcomed by Ali Pasha. Byron's letter to his mother written from Preveza in November 1809 provides detailed information of dress and lifestyle of the time, including his own purchase of costume. He records the wealth of the area provided a very comfortable lifestyle for the upper class members of the population, this would include Greeks as well as Ottomans as is evident by the clothing worn² (Prothero, 1898:250). Scarce has also recorded the style of Greek dress at the time and the influence of Ottoman dress for the fashionable women of the day (Scarce, 1987:90–111). Britain and France both had consuls resident in the capital (Fleming, 1996:7), making it clear that Ioannina was a cosmopolitan place with many outside influences on this thriving textile capital. Other parts of Greece were also involved in trade and textile production but during the rule of Ali Pasha, Ioannina was *the* textile capital of Greece.

Epirus embroidery

Epirus along with a number of other areas of modern Greece has its own distinct style of embroidery and some fine examples are held in various museums around the world such as the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Textile Museum in Washington D.C and the Benaki Museum in Athens to name a few (Taylor, 1998:175–186). Traditional embroidery of Greece remained despite its many conquerors and their

² Although Byron uses the term “Albanian” when he describes the full outfit of fustanella and upper clothing, it must be remembered that at the time the terms Albanian and Greek were fairly flexible in their application.

influences on this craft. The embroidery designs and style of embroidery were passed on from generation to generation. The Ottoman influence during the reign of Ali Pasha can clearly be seen in the embroideries from the Epirus region yet they still very much remain Greek embroidery. Petrakis summarises the essence of all Greek embroidery regardless of where in Greece it was made.

Three artistic principles governed the use of motifs: austerity (rigidity), symmetry, and the fear of empty spaces (*horror vacui*). The first canon is exemplified by the frieze like designs used along the borders of sheets where, for example, a plant would have a large bird on either side of it (the tree of life pattern), this set of motifs would be repeated all along the border. The fear of having empty spaces can be observed very clearly in Skyros embroidery of the ship where every inch of space of the ship and around it is covered with human, animal, or plant motifs. In some Yannina work, for example, a serrated leaf might have other leaves and flowers embroidered within it. The motifs were always used in stylised forms. (Petrakis, 1977:22)

Thus the embroidery of Epirus employs the basic principles of Greek embroidery while embracing the influence of Asia Minor motifs incorporated into its own distinct designs. Similarly, the long period of Venetian rule over Crete has led to an easily identifiable style known as Cretan, still Greek, but with strong elements of the Italian style. The heavily embroidered skirt borders of Crete, circa 1750 are clearly Italianate in influence of design (Taylor, 1998:107–117). However during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century the difference in regional pattern and design was not so readily understood apart from those with a specialist interest in Greek embroidery.

Bazaars and Greek textiles: a crude attempt at classification

During the latter part of the nineteenth century there was a flurry of interest by English foreigners in Greek embroidery. Trilling suggests that England with its long standing tradition of needlework became entranced with Greek embroidery due to the impact of industrialisation on English craft. He argues that:

In the nineteenth century, its artists, designers and writers were among the first to recognize the Industrial Revolution's threat to traditional, personal craftsmanship. One response to this threat was a renewal of interest in traditional embroidery styles and techniques, notably those of the Greek islands. (Trilling, 1983:54)

The English interest in Greek embroidery coincided with Greece welcoming industrialisation. Hauser reports that during this period embroidered work began to flood the market bazaars in "Athens, Cairo and Stambul"³ and that the merchants of the time classified them in a haphazard way. They were sold as being either from Rhodes, Ioannina or Crete based loosely on the perception of the quality and style of the stitches (Hauser, 1940:254). Ioannina embroidery in particular had a reputation of

³ Istanbul was often referred to as Stamb(o)ul during the period in which Hauser was writing.

being of a very high standard. Taylor (1998) suggests that there were only two categories created, those from Rhodes and Ioannina. Whether it was two or three different identities given to the embroideries it is clear that there was limited knowledge of the embroideries being sold. The purchase of these textiles generated a genuine interest by the English collectors to find out more detail than the scant information provided when they were bought in the bazaars. Louisa Pesel, who had a strong knowledge of embroidery and design and was the director of the Royal Athens School of Needlework and Lace from 1903 until 1907,⁴ presented in the *Burlington Magazine* in 1906 her own analysis of a number of different embroidered works all grouped by dealers as being from Ioannina. What she observed was that:

[...] a point of noticeable interest in nearly all these embroideries is the high degree of conventionalisation which has been arrived at, probably through many centuries of work, added to a strong love of traditional methods. (Pesel, 1907:33)

After some further discussion she concluded that it was very difficult to say what was absolutely Ioannina work, but her knowledge of stitches, motifs and colours made her a good judge of what was most likely from the area. It was not until A.J.B Wace developed a formal classificatory system that collectors could more easily identify Epirus embroideries.

Classification of Greek embroideries by A.J.B Wace: a working model for the future

A.J.B Wace's research in the Balkans and the Greek islands from 1902 presented a deeper understanding of the textile work and its relationship to the way of life at the time. In his introduction to the text, *Mediterranean and Near Eastern Embroideries* he describes the embroideries of the Greek Islands and Epirus as having being classified in the following fashion:

Each group of Islands has its own peculiar types of embroidery made to suit its own type of house, for the house plans and consequently the plans of the embroideries made to decorate them differed from island group to island group. It is also noticeable that the dialects of the various groups differ, just as the house plans and embroidery differ. The islands on these principles can be divided into the following groups:

The Ionian Islands, to which we may attach for the purpose of discussion here Epirus on the northwestern mainland, with its principal town Yannina, the Cyclades, the Dodecanese, or Southern Sporades, the North Greek islands or Northern Sporades and Crete. (Wace, 1935:15)

The classification of Greek embroidery developed by Wace included the functional as well as the aesthetic role of textiles within each island group. The architecture of the different island homes dictated the type of domestic textile and its use. Symbols

⁴ For a more detailed study of Pesel and her collection see <http://ulita.leeds.ac.uk>.

embroidered were also positioned on textile pieces where they would be best seen according to where they would be displayed within the domestic interior. There was also the social role these domestic textiles performed in that it provided a vehicle for the women to demonstrate their skill as homemakers with their handiwork on display for all to see. Epirus, although on the mainland, was included in the classification because of the prolific amount of embroidery produced under the reign of Ali Pasha and its close connection with the design of the wealthy Epirote home.

Wace's classification of embroideries has remained in continual use including Epirus embroideries along with those of the Greek islands. For example Petrakis writes:

[...] embroideries for the home were used mainly on the islands; on mainland Greece, they were only found in Epirus. (Petrakis, 1977:15)

Johnstone does not make such a bold statement but says:

With the exception of Epirus, embroideries from the Greek mainland are almost entirely on dress. (Johnstone, 1972:26)

Trilling however offers another suggestion for the connection between Epirus and island embroidery and considers that although what is commonly referred to as Greek island embroideries often included embroideries from Epirus, this may have a much simpler explanation:

Other parts of the mainland also produced embroidery, but it tends to lack the refinement of the works from the regions just named⁵ and has not attracted the same attention from museums and collectors outside Greece. (Trilling, 1983:15)

Papantoniou maintains that embroideries were made for the home on the mainland after the end of the nineteenth century. Prior to that textiles for the home were mainly woven. So homes on the mainland were decorated with textiles as on the islands, it is simply that the type of textile displayed was usually not embroidered (Papantoniou, 1998:46).

Epirus embroidery: what similarity and difference to island embroidery?

So what was the reason that Epirus differed from the rest of the mainland? We know that in common with other parts of Greece the embroidery of Epirus conforms to the artistic principles of Greek embroidery as outlined by Petrakis above. Taylor argues that although logically because of its geography, Epirus embroidery should be studied as part of mainland Greece, it is properly considered alongside island embroidery because:

stylistically they are so different to the neighbouring provinces of Macedonia and Thessaly, which are part of a larger Balkan tradition of costume and embroidery. (Taylor, 1998:127)

⁵ Those regions mentioned in the full text are Crete, the Aegean and Ionian islands.

A further explanation for difference in style of Epirus embroidery may partly lie in Krody's description of some of the Epirote homes, which would distinguish them from other mainland residences, and thus the furnishing of those homes would also differ. Part of her description is as follows:

The houses of the rich Epirote families, especially those living in the capital Ioannina, were similar in plan, division of living quarters, and interior decoration to Ottoman houses founding Istanbul and other parts of the empire. (Krody, 2006:91)

The rich embroideries made specifically for the home were to be found on functional items such as cushions and bed covers. These heavily decorated items also provided the opportunity to display the embroidery prowess of its maker.

Another difference is that Ioannina, being the industrial textile centre of the Ottoman Empire and as a consequence, the wealthiest had the responsibility of producing all of the embroidered uniforms for the whole of the Balkan region (Taylor, 1998). Thus there was a great flourishing of embroidered goods of both a professional and domestic nature. The practice of young women preparing embroideries for the wedding dowry from a very young age was only a small part of the textile skills that were to be seen. As mentioned by Fleming above the variety of textile goods produced was due to the skills not only of the Greek women handing down their expertise from mother to daughter but also to the many professional trades persons such as the metal thread workers, the braid makers and the silk embroiderers (Taylor, 1998).

Epirus during the control of Ali Pasha was therefore blessed with an abundance of highly skilled artisans to undertake the professional embroidery work as well as the Greek women carrying on traditional Greek domestic embroidery for the home. As a matter of course the influence of many other nationalities work and designs would have an influence on the domestic embroideries of the Greek women of that time.

Petrakis maintains that some generalisation can be made in regard to the motifs found on textiles:

[...]the motifs of continental Greece are strongly influenced by the northern people, and the motifs of insular Greece are influenced by the East and the West. It is interesting to observe that the influences in the embroideries of a region or island coincide with the influence on the dialect of the people in that area. Once a design became traditionally established in a region it was repeated, with very few alterations by succeeding generations. (Petrakis, 1977:21)

The embroideries of Epirus from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which can be observed in museums today seems to bear this out in that the same motifs can be readily identified on textiles for the home. Unlike some of the textiles from Crete however, the embroideries from the past do not have a date embroidered on them, so provenance has to be relied on for dating purposes.

It is suggested then that Epirus embroidery remains true to the principles of Greek embroidery but is stylistically different from its near mainland neighbours largely due to the lengthy Ottoman occupation and its influence on domestic life through

the adoption of style in the home and the furnishing of the home with embroidered textiles. This difference led to the common classification with the island embroideries.

Embroidered textiles, their domestic use and symbolic motifs: the Epirus example

The textiles embroidered for the bride to take to her new home were heavily decorated with symbolic motifs. The wedding, being the most important occasion in a young woman's life heralded much change as she would leave her family home forever and with her new husband enter into his family. The young woman had embroidered her hopes and dreams into the textiles good luck for the future, protection from the evil eye, a life full of happiness. The stitching of these wishes also demonstrated her skill with the needle and the materials used indicate how financially comfortable the bride's parents were. If these textiles were lavish in threads and the quality of the fabric high, this would have been noted by those attending the wedding (Krody, 2006:91).¹

Embroidery texts featuring research on Epirus textiles most often offer some discussion on the textiles created for celebration of the wedding and the textiles needed for the new home. These are usually bolsters, cushions or bed sheets and it is these commonly seen in the museums. But these particular embroideries also offer such a rich example of Greek symbolism as well as easily identifiable Ottoman influences. A typical wedding embroidery from Epirus made during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries would feature the wedding procession with the bride and groom wearing very detailed embroidered costume, with some examples of Ottoman influence in the clothing design. Particular flowers common to Ottoman embroidery would often be featured. The rest of the wedding entourage would consist of the best man and other relatives on horseback, surrounded by birds and animals. Taylor describes one such wedding bolster from Epirus (circa 1750) as presenting these symbolic motifs:

hyacinths, carnations and stylised roses—a whole menagerie of animals for good luck—fat partridges and parrots, dogs, cats and leopards and even women faced harpies, hardly an emblem of good luck, but perhaps they are there to avert bad luck. (Taylor, 1988:135)

The tulip, carnation, hyacinth and rose are common to Ottoman embroidery as these were all flowers commonly grown in Turkish gardens (Berry, 1938:261), and it is not surprising that it is incorporated in much of the Epirus work along with other motifs which held particular meaning for the Greek women stitching these celebratory textiles.

A brief explanation of some of the motifs featured particularly in embroideries demonstrates the influence of the past and the east in particular. Different cultural groups may place different meanings on some of the motifs. Those used by the Epirote

¹ For a more detailed description of a typical Epirus wedding embroidery see Taylor, 1998:135.

women of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries can be seen to have universal understanding throughout Greece whilst retaining their Epirote character.

Provided below is a list of symbols and meanings, which serve to demonstrate at a glance the relationship between the motif and the dreams and wishes, stitched into the cloth of the Epirus bridal embroideries.

Birds

Birds appear frequently in Greek embroideries and are for good luck. Paine suggests that birds form one most common embroidery motifs in the world.

Birds almost everywhere represent the spirit world. They are messengers from heaven, the sky and the sun gods and they carry the souls of the departed to the after life, where they become birds themselves. (Paine, 2008:159)

Some attributes of the specific bird motifs for the bridal embroideries of Epirus may have the following significance.

The partridge (perdika) is featured frequently and seen as a symbol of well being and good health and can also represent the innocence of the new bride. (Koroxenidis, 2006)

The parrot, which is in Indian and Persian literature, carries messages between separated lovers. (Taylor, 1998:134)

The peacock symbolises the resurrection in early Christian times (Ohms, 1989:83) and is also considered a Byzantine motif used to fend off bad luck. (Koroxenidis, 2006)

Fruit and Trees

Greek myth has long associated the pomegranate with fertility and abundance because of the many seeds in the fruit. Ohms states that the pomegranate was originally a native of Persia and Afghanistan. (Ohms, 1989:92)

Tree of Life

A symbol used in many countries but argued to have an eastern origin and long featured in work in Persia, Morocco and India, the tree of life is presented in a variety of forms and shapes. (Ohms, 1989:87)

It has a long history as a motif in Greek embroidery and can also be featured as a flowerpot with blooms (the Glastra) and is commonly seen as a symbol of longevity. (Paine, 2008:142)

Vessels

Taylor when describing an Epirus wedding textile includes

a water ewer as a symbol of purity, the bride described as 'chaste as cold water'. (Taylor, 1988:135)

Harpie

Harpies, part woman and part bird-like creature are thought by some to avert the evil eye. (Krody, 2008:79)

There are numerous other motifs, which hold symbolic meanings, many of these also appear in other villages on the mainland up until fairly recent times.

Gertsakis writes from Australia of her heritage from the Greek Macedonian region where she indicates the following symbols could still be found in 20th century embroideries:

Tree of life, fertility goddess, geometric motifs sharp enough to blind the evil eye, birds, deers and cocks (which were protective clan symbols); zigzags or chevrons in a line again represented fertility as water or snakes. (Gertsakis, 1997:68)

The motifs on the wedding embroideries of Epirus represent a small example of a particular part of modern Greece that was highly influenced by the Ottomans during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The incorporation of motifs and symbols from the Ottoman period are integrated to represent a visual language well understood by the society of the day. The textiles remind us of the strength of Greek spirit and tradition. Embroidery provides a doorway to the past which enables us through the symbolic meaning of the motifs chosen, to better understand the hopes and wishes of the young women of the day.

Conclusion

With Greece having such a rich heritage portrayed in these beautiful textiles the question remains as to how many women who have embroideries from the past in their possession today have an understanding of the symbolic meaning contained in the motifs. Will this be knowledge that is left to the museum specialists to nurture and keep or will this heritage and knowledge be passed on to the young women of today?

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